RISKY BUSINESS: THE CHALLENGE OF EAST-WEST COMPARATIVE STUDIES

Longxi Zhang*

Abstract: Comparative literature, especially as it is practiced as an academic discipline in American universities, seems to have had its frustrations and an acute sense of crisis. East-West comparative literature,in particular, has been put to question as a utopian (read 'quixotic') and even impossible endeavor. The relativist insistence on cultural incommensurability and untranslatability forms a major challenge, and the lure of facile and mechanical application of Western theories to non-Western texts constitutes another. By reviewing some recent works, the author warns against the danger of theoretical speculations in total and neglecting the basic principles of persuasive argument and critical integrity. Against all the difficulties and challenges, however, the author argues for the value and validity of East-West comparative studies as an important discipline that will make significant contributions to the development of cross-cultural understanding and communication.

AT THE end of the nineteenth century, literary criticism, as Anatole France famously put it, was "a sort of romance," "an autobiography," and a "good critic is he who relates the adventures of his own soul among masterpieces." (France, 1924, 9.vii) Adventure always involves a certain degree of risk, but the soul's adventure in France's understanding was characterized by intellectual curiosity and the joy of discovery, the acquiring of insights into life and the world, rather than a risk of any real consequences. Things have changed drastically in the last hundred years, and at the end of the twentieth century, the idea of "masterpiece" has been challenged by radical theories and the critic's "adventure" now involves a totally different kind of risk: that of his reputation, conscience, even his career, a risk Anatole France could not have possibly foreseen when he spoke of the "adventures" of the critic's own soul. With "masterpieces" or literary "canon" seriously questioned in critical discourse and evaluation;with judgment frowned upon as elitist, hegemonic, and complicitous with power, criticism has retreated from the public domain into the limited space of academic discourse, and even there, as Rónán McDonald argues, we are witnessing the "Death of the Critic".[1] The obituary of the critic, like that of literature itself, may have overstated the case for a dramatic effect, but when we talk about comparative literature, particularly comparative studies across the boundaries of China and Europe or East and West, we often run into

*LONGXI ZHANG, Chair Professor of Comparative Literature and Translation at City University of Hong Kong, and an elected foreign member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities. E-mail: ctlxzh@cityu.edu.hk

[1] See Rónán McDonald, *The Death of the Critic* (London: Continuum, 2007).

difficulties and challenges that make comparative study a rather risky business.

In the early days of comparative literature, the ground for comparison was established in terms of actual contact between writers and their works, the so-called *rapport de fait*. Since there was little contact between China and the West till rather late in the long temporal stretch of Chinese history, nothing, from the perspective of influence studies, could provide a legitimate ground for Chinese-Western comparative studies, especially of pre-modern literature. Although comparative literature has long moved away from such positivistic emphasis on real contact and influence, it has not embraced East-West comparative literature as it should have. Comparative literature today is not impervious to the influence of cultural relativism, which has become a predominant paradigm in much of contemporary critical discourse and, especially in the form of post-colonialism, has in fact a hidden connection with the old-fashioned comparative literature and influence studies, because it still concerns itself with the actual contact and influence between Europe and its former colonies, even though understood negatively. "Even newer forms of postcolonial comparativism," as Emily Apter observes, "have inadvertently perpetuated neo-colonial geopolitics in carrying over the imperial carve-up of linguistic fields." (Apter, 2006, 55) More comparatists in the West are writing about Francophone or Anglophone literatures than engaging Chinese or East Asian literature that has less ties with colonial and postcolonial experiences than, say, India or Algeria.

From the perspective of cultural relativism, comparative literature is useful insofar as it provides illustrations of the otherness of different cultures. As many Chinese comparatists tend to find similarities and thematic affinities as well as differences between East and West, they appear theoretically and ideologically incorrect in the eyes of cultural relativists. Indeed, a critic has dismissed Chinese-Western comparative literature as "essentially a *utopian* project," an intellectual fantasy "inscribed" in an "impossible disciplinary space," and incapable of addressing "the radical alterity of Chinese cultural objects." (Palumbo-Liu, 1992, 14). In this critic's eyes, Chinese-Western comparative literature is worthless unless you can show by every comparison or contrast that "Chinese cultural objects," whatever that means, are basically alien and fundamentally different from their counterparts in the West. Any comparison that does otherwise would be denigrated as "utopian," that is, dreamy, empty, and futile; particularly when it brings up similar patterns, shared ideas or, worst of all, the common humanity among writers and literary works East and West. The relativist overemphasis on cultural difference or "cultural alterity" would indeed put much of Chinese-Western comparative studies at risk, or simply write it off as insignificant, impossible, and worthless.

With Chinese comparatists, however, the emphasis on cultural difference has a problem. The very concept of "the radical alterity of Chinese cultural objects" obviously presupposes a Western perspective, from which Chinese cultural objects would appear alien and reveal a

kind of "radical alterity." Such an emphasis, however, when put under closer scrutiny, turns out to be not so much generally Western as it is specifically American. Terry Eagleton has shrewdly observed that "nothing is more indigenously American these days than otherness." Emphasis on otherness or cultural difference purports to fight parochialism in a multicultural American society that largely consists of generations of immigrants with diverse cultural backgrounds and has trouble dealing with that multicultural variety, but ironically, "it is also a piece of parochialism in itself, rooted by and large in the intractable ethnic problems of the United States." It is ironic because whatever is local in America tends to become global in the rest of the world, and thus we find this not so unfamiliar situation: "These home-grown concerns are then projected onto the rest of the globe rather like a cultural version of nuclear missile bases, so that post-colonial others find themselves obediently adopting the agenda of a largely American-bred cult of otherness." The question of otherness is obviously important, but critics in other countries are found busily at work on the question of the "other," as Eagleton puts it, "because this is the programme peddled for its own private reasons, as it were, by the nation which sets the academic pace in these affairs." (Eagleton, 2005, 3)

In a way, this does look like a cultural version of the global dominance of the United States. The irony is also articulated in a sarcastic tone by Harish Trivedi, a senior professor of English at the University of Delhi. "Only yesterday," says Trivedi with regard to English studies in India, "have we begun asking questions about canon, context, relevance, reception, response, the other, the alternative (alter-native?), historicism old and new, orientalism, feminism, and the all-Derriding Theory, and this for the good reason that such questions began to be asked about English literature in England and America the day before yesterday." (Trivedi, 1993, 229) That is to say, what the postcolonial others are doing is still to follow the agenda set up in academic institutions in England and North America. To be fair, however, it is not just an American parochialism that makes the "other" an academic fetish. Jonathan Spence specifically identifies the effort to create "mutually reinforcing images and perceptions" of an exotic China as what he calls a "French exotic," "a particularly French genius."(Spence, 1998, 145) From Victor Segalen's *Essai sur l'exotisme* at the turn of the century to books and articles produced by François Jullien today, the French exotic certainly has its own illustrious tradition, but once we realize that the "cult of otherness" or the emphasis on "cultural alterity" is actually an indigenous and even parochial project in American or French academic institutions, we may feel less troubled by the dismissal of Chinese-Western comparative literature as "utopian" or "impossible," even though engaging in East-West studies is always taking a risk in answering to the challenges of national-literature specialists on the one hand, and postmodern and postcolonial theorists on the other. Chinese-Western comparative literature does not have to be justified on the basis of providing examples of fundamental cultural differences for Western self-understanding, and that there are other ways of grounding our work

in literary studies beyond the usual EastWest divide. If a Western cultural relativist demands to see the East as a reverse mirror image of the West, be it the Foucaultian heterotopia or the Barthean Empire of empty, non-signifying Signs, why should we feel obliged to follow suit and obediently provide so much grist to the relativist mill?

In what I consider to be the best introduction to comparative literature to date, Claudio Guillén's *Challenge of Comparative Literature*, literary theory is proposed to be the most effective means to legitimize East-West comparative studies not on the old ground of *rapport de fait*, but on the theoretical grounds of comparable genres, themes, and various conceptualizations of similarities and differences, of which the supranational comparability does not need to be historically imbedded. Literary theory, says Guillén, can thus provide the necessary and useful framework within which East-West studies will become "the most promising tendency in comparative literature." (Guillén, 1993, 87) That is certainly encouraging, and much work in East-West studies has indeed been accomplished since the rise of literary theory in the West. It was in the 1970s that Chinese-Western comparative literature first started to develop in Taiwan and Hong Kong, and soon followed by development in mainland China in the 1980s and beyond. What Guillén calls literary theory refers mostly to theories from formalism to structuralism that still take the reading of literature more or less as the core of an aesthetic experience, and the function of theory is to help the comparatist examine the reading experience across linguistic, cultural, and historical boundaries. Guillén criticized the "facile and hasty worldliness" that tries to find equivalent or even identical items in the East for every Western literary form, but he also criticized "the excluding attitudes of Sinologists and other specialists who remain walled up in their exotic and arrogant science, as if there were no common ground, analogous themes, comparable forms; as if the human race were irremediably and absolutely divided into watertight compartments. A Pindaric hymn," Guillén continues to argue, "is neither more accessible nor less remote than a song of Li Po—to be sure, only for those who possess the necessary linguistic and cultural preparation." (Ibid., 119-20) Thus literary theory is supposed to help us understand and appreciate both Pindar and Li Po in literary criticism, and that is why it becomes extremely important for East-West comparative studies beyond positivistic notions of contact and influence.

But literary theory is an ambiguous term and contains a variety of theoretical orientations that quickly moved away from literature itself in further development. While we celebrate the liberating power of literary theory and the accomplishments of many comparatists among ourselves, we also realize all along that literary theory used in Chinese-Western comparative studies is unequivocally Western, the applicability of which may sometimes become a problem. Even at the early stage of the development of Chinese-Western comparative literature, Heh-hsiang Yuan already raised the question of the relationship between Western theory and Chinese literature. He puts the question rather bluntly when he says: "the major problem facing those of us who adopt (and even

adapt) Western critical theories in analyzing and evaluating Chinese literary works is applicability." (Yuan, 1980, 21) Indeed, applicability can become a problem on several levels, but ultimately it is the problem of facile and mechanical application, the mismatch of theoretical questions emerged in one cultural and social milieu with literary works produced in another. If, for example, the question of otherness, difference or alterity, as we have seen above, is a concern in American academic discourse responding to specific problems in the multiethnic and multicultural American society, it becomes problematic whether the emphasis on otherness and difference should also be the major concern in Chinese-Western comparative literature. An even bigger problem is that literary theory has been displaced by cultural studies in the West, particularly in America, so much so that even American comparatists have realized the identity crisis of comparative studies as literature has lost its central place in literary studies. As Haun Saussy puts it in his ACLA report published in 2006: "at moments in the last few decades, it has seemed possible to make a career in literary studies without making sustained reference to works of literature: one could study aesthetic theory, literary history, reception, pedagogy—even the history of theories of literature—as so many independent fields." (Saussy, 2006, 12) Actually, the situation is even worse than that, as I shall show in a moment, for sometimes we find literary texts being used to fit the Procrustean bed of theoretical stipulates without consideration of coherence, evidence, or feasibility.

Let me discuss a random example that I have encountered, but an example quite relevant to our discussion of East-West comparative studies. A recent East-West special issue of *Comparative Literature Studies* (no. 1, 2008) features an article by Valerie Henitiuk with a rather provocative title: "Going to Bed with Waley: How Murasaki Shikibu Does and Does Not Become World Literature." That title deliberately misquotes Virginia Woolf, who wrote in her diary in an appropriately shorthand manner that she would be "home to bed with Waley," which of course means to go home and read in bed Arthur Waley's translation of the famous Japanese classic, *The Tale of Genji*, by Murasaki Shikibu. Being associated with the Bloomsbury group, Waley's translations of Chinese and Japanese literary works were known to that group, of which Virginia Woolf is a major figure. In fact, Woolf reviewed Waley's translation of the *Tale of Genji* with great enthusiasm. Henitiuk's essay is not about Waley, however, but about an imaginary, ideal, and non-existent translation of the *Tale of Genji* that Virginia Woolf might have produced herself! But did Virginia Woolf know Japanese? That might be the first question immediately coming to a reader's mind. So far as we know, she didn't, but "Woolf learned Russian well enough to collaborate on English version of several works from that body of literature," Henitiuk tells us, "and it was therefore not unfeasible for her to have done the same with Japanese." (Henitiuk, 2008, 41) But that "therefore" simply begs the question and does not make sense: does it follow that if you know Russian, you can also translate Japanese? If that were true, then, a department of Slavic languages could swallow up an East Asian

department and save a bundle for any university. That would be wonderful news to a university administrator, particularly in America, where for decades we have witnessed a noticeable decrease in undergraduate enrollment in Russian and other European languages except Spanish, while enrollments in Chinese and Japanese, which happen to be Arthur Waley's specialties, have been steadily on the rise. The reality is that proficiency in Russian or Greek does not qualify you to be a translator of Japanese. I wonder whether it is possible for anyone to argue that you can translate Virginia Woolf without knowing English, or translate Simone de Beauvoir without knowing French. If no one would take such a purely hypothetical argument seriously, why would it be possible to take seriously the argument that you can translate a Japanese classic without knowing Japanese?

Henitiuk's point is not, however, about linguistic expertise or translation as such. She tries to argue that Waley and the other translators of the *Genji*, all being male, cannot possibly assume the status of "women of sensibility" that Virginia Woolf might have shared with Lady Murasaki. (Ibid., 43) Linguistic knowledge is irrelevant, and what matters for Henitiuk is female solidarity. "Had she known Japanese and been tempted to translate this tale," she speculates, "Woolf would have been uniquely positioned to reveal many proto-feminist aspects of the *Genji*, and thereby able to craft a world literature text belonging solidly within a feminocentric discourse tradition." (Ibid., 43) Unfortunately, Woolf did not know Japanese and did not feel tempted to translate the *Tale of Genji*, and that, Henitiuk laments, "must be ranked as an irreparable loss to women's writing and a global female tradition, as well as to the reception of the *Genji Monogatari* throughout the modern West, that Woolf was never able, metaphorically speaking, to go to bed with Murasaki Shikibu herself." (Ibid., 59) The homoerotic insinuation in the last sentence carries the force of an almost prerequisite punch line in Lesbian studies, through which a 10th-century Japanese female writer is effortlessly enlisted in the "feminocentric discourse tradition" established in contemporary criticism in the West.

That, in effect, is the substance of a critical essay published in as respectable a journal as *Comparative Literature Studies*. "Substance" may be the wrong word here, for the essay is based on pure speculation, the idea of an imaginary translation of a world literature text with no required linguistic expertise or specific cultural knowledge. In other words, the essay's argument cannot and does not need to be substantiated with anything other than the theoretical stipulates of feminism or gay and lesbian studies.

I said Lady Murasaki was "effortlessly" enlisted in the "feminocentric discourse tradition" because Henitiuk seems to operate by simply assuming a great deal without taking the trouble to argue for it, let alone to prove it. For example, she does not bother to ask whether Murasaki Shikibu as a court lady in 10th century Japan, given the social and moral conditions of the time, would have no objection to going to bed, even metaphorically speaking, with an English woman ten centuries her junior. Henitiuk seems to assume that the Oriental lady, in good old

Odalisque fashion, is always obediently willing. More obviously, she simply states that Virginia Woolf could have given the world a translation of the *Tale of Genji* despite the fact that Woolf did not know the Japanese language. But if an ideal translation of the *Genji* can dispense with linguistic expertise and requires only female sensibility, why not other feminist writers throughout the centuries, real or imagined, from Judith Shakespeare to Adrienne Rich, also provide translations of the Japanese classic to compete with Virginia Woolf's? Are journals like *CLS* ready to publish innumerable essays based on pure theoretical notions and hypothetical speculations? How much pure speculation like that can be accepted as scholarship before it is recognized as ridiculous fantasies and absurdities?

The problem is of course not with theories of feminism or queer studies as such, but with the way Henitiuk uses theory to make her case in total disregard of basic elements of a persuasive argument. To talk about translation with no linguistic expertise required is not going to make much sense, and to base one's argument on pure speculation or fanciful hypothesis is not going to convince or convert a lot of readers. But articles like this are now being produced and published in respectable journals and may even become normative and exemplary in Western scholarship; thus questions may arise as to what should and should not be the acceptable procedure and protocols of a critical argument. Do we need to provide reasonable analysis and textual evidence to make a persuasive argument in comparative studies? Does the usual procedure of an intellectual argument still hold, which requires some sort of historical grounding in certain known facts of an author's life and times? My guess is that most scholars, comparatists, and literary critics still do judge the cogency of an argument according to those basic criteria, but few would take the risk of challenging articles like Henitiuk's because these articles often claim to represent traditionally marginalized, repressed, victimized groups in society, e.g., women, minorities, homosexuals, etc., and therefore any critique of such articles may risk being condemned as old-fashioned, conservative, politically incorrect or even reactionary. In a real political sense, then, it takes a lot of courage to raise questions about articles that justify their argument on the basis of theoretical orientations like feminism or gay and lesbian studies. But I believe that all arguments, whatever their theoretical orientation, must be brought to the same rigorous test of coherence and plausibility, must make their case by evidence and persuasion, and must take logical steps and make reasonable claims so as to convince readers.

It is therefore worthwhile to take that risk to question arguments that do not persuade but coerce, based not on reasoning but political or ideological articles of faith. The comparatist's work is constantly subject to scrutiny and challenge by specialists, as intellectual rigor has often been a problem for a discipline for which comparison per se has never provided sufficient *raison d'être*. The comparatist must also be prepared to face the challenge of theoretical pressure that makes excessive claims about literary texts and presents a radical facade for self-legitimization. Eventually, doing Chinese-Western comparative literature is indeed like

taking a risk, an intellectual adventure that may provoke reactions, lead to controversies, but also promise the potential of insights and discoveries, the possibility of better understanding and communication between East and West. That, I hope, would be the future development of East-West comparative studies. I do not completely agree with Anatole France, but I do hope that criticism will return to activities which are motivated by the love of literature and culture, to what France calls the adventures of the soul among our favorite writers and their works, to the articulation of critical ideas with theoretical sophistication, not dogmatic coercion.

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